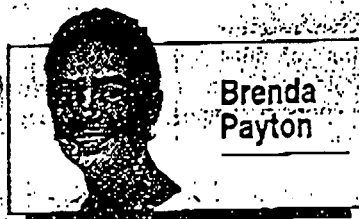


# Oakland's shameful neglect of a hazardous playground

**Y**OU'VE got to wonder — if Verdesse Carter Park were in the Oakland hills would it be contaminated with high levels of lead? Would the surrounding yards also be contaminated with lead if they were yards adjacent to houses in the hills?

But Verdesse Carter Park is not in the hills. It's at the corner of 96th Avenue and Sunnyside Street in the heart of East Oakland's flatlands. And the park, referred to as Poison Park, was closed before it was even opened because it was contaminated. The park was built on the site of an old battery factory.

That was in 1978. Back then, the Elmhurst District Community Council blasted the city for failing to adequately check the lead levels in the soil. Community residents had been trying to get the city to check the lead levels for months.



Brenda Payton

around the sand lot. Children regularly went through the openings in the fence and played in the sand lot.

You've got to wonder if the city would have taken that approach if the park were in the hills.

## Basketball court ooze

Then in 1993, residents began to notice a yellowish-white substance oozing up through the cracks in the basketball court. Rafeeq Naji noticed the strange substance during a game with a friend. "There was a

didn't stop at the playground. Naji said as residents learned about the possibility of lead leeching out of the park, they urged the city to test the soil in the neighborhood. The area wasn't tested until the Environmental Protection Agency came in.

Last week the results were released. The tests detected extremely high levels of lead in the yards of houses around the park — one yard registered levels 50 times higher than what was considered acceptable at the park.

You just wonder whether the neighbor's concerns would have been handled so casually if they had been living near a park in the hills.

Over the years, City Hall has been less than responsive to this serious health hazard, no matter who was in office.

In 1978 residents might have imagined that if there were more African-American city officials, the city would have been more concerned about the welfare of the predominately African-American neighborhood. They received a rude awakening.

When the severity of the problem resurfaced in 1990 and 1993, African Americans had gained the top positions in city government. Still, the city allowed a situation in which children played in areas that were known to be contaminated with lead — in areas that the city knew to be contaminated for 15 years.

## Rightfully outraged

The residents living around Verdesse Carter Park have every right to be outraged by the city's harmful neglect. The health of their children has been compromised. Their own health has been endangered. The value of their property and homes undermined.

You just have to wonder — would the problem have been handled as it was if Verdesse Carter Park were in the hills rather than in East Oakland's flatlands? No matter who is in office at City Hall.

## The city allowed a situation in which children played in areas that were known to be contaminated with lead.

The council actually paid for tests that detected high levels of lead. The state followed up with its own tests and found levels as high as 96 times the level considered safe.

City officials finally responded by removing the top 12 inches of soil, replacing it with topsoil. The park was opened.

## Sand lot closed

In 1990, after neighbors complained of the erosion of playground equipment, the soil was tested again. This time two areas below the sand lot had lead levels exceeding the state standards. A consultant recommended the city remove the sand and excavate between 12 and 18 inches of soil.

Instead, the city removed the equipment and put up a fence

sign on the fence that said "Hazard" but children were playing in the sand lot inside of the fence," he said.

"The gardeners working for the city even told us how bad the park was and asked if we could do something about it," Naji said he went to the city that day to report the oozing substance. No one listened. After protests from residents, the park was closed.

Naji reports a disturbing lack of concern about the lead contamination and its health effects. In spite of the years of exposure to the lead in the park, there has not been an official survey of the health problems of neighboring residents. Naji says residents report unusually high incidents of miscarriages, breast cancer and illnesses among children.

But the city's lack of concern

Brenda Payton's column appears in The Oakland Tribune on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.